

Tomb of Kikuchi Takemitsu

Kikuchi Takemitsu (1319–1373) was the fifteenth head of the Kikuchi clan, its greatest war hero, and an influential reformer under whom the clan evolved from a local samurai group into the most powerful political force in Kyushu.

Troubled beginnings

When Takemitsu was 14 years old, his father, Taketoki (1292–1333), the twelfth leader of the clan and a sworn ally of Emperor Godaigo (1288–1339), was killed while leading a failed assault in Hakata (present-day Fukuoka) on forces loyal to the Kamakura shogunate, the warrior-led government that ruled Japan at the time. The Kamakura shogunate was toppled only months later, triggering a period of instability during which the imperial court and proponents of warrior rule vied for control of the country.

As a result of this power struggle, the imperial court split into two in 1336. The Kikuchi remained loyal to Godaigo, whose Southern Court was opposed by the warrior-backed Northern Court, but were defeated in several battles against the Northern forces. Two of Takemitsu's older brothers headed the Kikuchi clan after their father, but one died young and the other was forced to resign his position. By 1344, when Takemitsu's turn came to lead the clan, the Kikuchi were severely weakened and surrounded by enemies.

Takemitsu's rise

Takemitsu endeavored to bring the Kikuchi into a new era. To strengthen the Kikuchi base of power, he carried out administrative reforms in the clan's heartland around the castle town of Waifu (now central Kikuchi). His policies included creating the Kikuchi Gozan (Five Temples) system by placing five Zen temples in Waifu under special protection. In return, these temples served the Kikuchi by performing various administrative, supervisory, and religious duties.

On the political front, Takemitsu joined forces with Prince Kanenaga (also known as Kaneyoshi; 1329–1383), the son of Emperor Godaigo, who had been sent to Kyushu to build an alliance between the Southern Court and local warrior groups. The backing of royalty allowed Takemitsu to expand his clan's territory and influence, and some 15 years after being named lord of the Kikuchi, he had assembled a powerful coalition from across Kyushu.

Conquest and collapse

In 1359, some 40,000 warriors led by Takemitsu and Prince Kanenaga defeated a force of around 60,000 Northern Court loyalists at the Battle of Chikugo River, near the present-day city of Kurume. This decisive victory allowed the Kikuchi-led alliance to take control of Kyushu and made Takemitsu perhaps the most powerful man on the island.

In the years following their victory, the Kikuchi set out to fortify their positions; however, a request from the Southern Court that the victorious Kyushu leaders visit the emperor in Yoshino (near Nara) ended in disaster. A fleet commanded by Takemitsu set sail from Kyushu but was intercepted and routed by a Northern force. The Northern side then dispatched a new general, the renowned strategist Imagawa Ryoshun (1326–1420), to deal with the threat in Kyushu.

In 1372, Ryoshun drove the Kikuchi-led forces from the Hakata region, and Takemitsu had no choice but to regroup further south. In 1373, as the Kikuchi were fortifying their positions around the Chikugo River, the site of their earlier triumph, Takemitsu suddenly died under unknown circumstances.

Left without its greatest general, the Southern force led by Prince Kanenaga was pushed ever deeper into Kyushu. Kanenaga's death in 1383 ended the Southern resistance for good, and the Kikuchi were again confined to their ancestral lands around Waifu.

Takemitsu's tomb

Kikuchi Takemitsu was buried at Shokanji, a temple he had founded after becoming head of the clan. According to legend, the giant camphor tree towering over the tomb was planted during Takemitsu's funeral. The current headstone was erected in 1779 by wealthy Waifu residents and stands on a distinctive base in the shape of a Chinese mythological creature with the features of a turtle and a snake. This style was popularized among high-ranking samurai in Japan in the 1700s.